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Half Human, Half Velocipede: The Bicycle-Ridden World of *The Third Policeman* by Flann O'Brien

What would you say if a policeman approached you with the following confession: "'I will tell you a secret,' he said very confidentially in a low voice. 'My great-grandfather was eighty-three when he died. For a year before his death he was a horse.'"[1]? The question may seem rather academic but at bottom it challenges our capacity for thinking beyond purely rational categories. A question like this impels you to make a choice: either you dismiss the policeman's confession on logical and commonsensical grounds or you acquiesce and decide to play by his rules. In the latter case, you stand a chance of being introduced to an alternative world governed by different physical laws and populated by hitherto unheard-of species. It is the world of Flann O'Brien's fiction, a meeting-place of the mundane, the absurd, the uncanny and the fantastic, where the grotesque and the macabre hold their clandestine convention.

The unfolding of my argument, indebted as it is to O'Brien's narrative principles in *The Third Policeman*, requires that I programmatically avoid taking a rational stand. After all my essay will be

[1] Flann O'Brien, *The Third Policeman* (London: Flamingo, 2001), p. 99.

concerned with one of the most glaringly irrational works written in the 20th century by one of the most acute chroniclers of the impasses of the logical in everyday life. I am out to convey, in an imperfect medium of words, what eludes the grammar and syntax of reason; O'Brien's fiction will be taken to act out the ineluctable antagonism between the actual and the imaginative. There is an important sense in which *The Third Policeman* is a utopian work, however powerfully it alludes to the Free Irish State reality. In some respects it also anticipates the postmodernist distrust of rationality.[2] But first and foremost it is a superbly creative and complete vision of a parallel *universum*, a modern otherworld stripped off of all the usual metaphysical mumbo-jumbo, which has been replaced by a sophisticated pseudo-scientific *irrationale*.

Apparently to his chagrin, O'Brien had to live in a real world, where history provided an accumulation of episodes and circumstances which distracted potential readers from his fiction. He was born in 1911, when Ireland was still occupied by the British. At home he spoke mostly Irish (his father taught this language with the Gaelic League at that time), so he had to learn English from books. His real name was Brian Ó Nualláin but throughout his adult life he relied on pseudonyms, whether he edited student magazines, signed his regular column in *The Irish Times* or published novels. Those pennames were probably meant to mark the boundary between his actual person involved in various mundane affairs, like studying or working in the civil service, and the self engrossed in the realm of creative writing. Right from the start Ó Nualláin was doomed to follow in Joyce's wake: he had ten siblings (to Joyce's nine), whom he had to support; he attended the same college, excelled in languages and literature, cut an eccentric figure at University College Dublin and made a name for himself as a gifted speaker. At the age of twenty-four he took a momentous decision which was intended

[2] Of all O'Brien's works, *At Swim-Two-Birds* is certainly the most consistently postmodernist text, an invaluable link between some key modernist concerns – authorship, tradition, the artist vis á vis the vulgar – and postmodernism's emphasis on intertextuality and metafiction.

to disentagle his fate from his famous compatriot's: Ó Nualláin made up his mind NOT to emigrate from Ireland.[3]

In this respect, Ó Nualláin certainly signed up for the minority of great Irish writers of the modernist period. He chose, as he put it himself, a "homebased exile"[4] to a life detached from his native tongue and culture (this was Joyce's lot). This is not to say, however, that he managed to extricate himself from under Joyce's influence. In 1939 the publication of Ó Nualláin's first book coincided with the coming out of *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's last. Inevitably, then, Ó Nualláin has been seen as Joyce's inheritor and successor. That this perturbed the younger writer can be clearly inferred from his final effort, *The Dalkey Archive*, which has *the* James Joyce as one of its characters. In the novel, set mostly in the post-war Dalkey (a small town a couple of miles south of Dublin), Joyce is a caricature of the great Irish artist: he lives in hiding, having spread the rumours of his death in 1941, and confides to the main character of the novel that, except for *Dubliners*, he never wrote any of those books which are commonly ascribed to him by his mad publishers. Asked about *Ulysses*, he bursts out into a torrent of invective, calling the novel "that dirty book" and a "collection of smut."[5] Moreover, Joyce discloses his sincere intention to join the Jesuit order thereby ruining his reputation for spiritual independence and a critical attitude to the Catholic Church.

Ó Nualláin must have been at a loss when he received the news that the poorly-sighted Joyce had read his *At Swim-Two-Birds* with the aid of a magnifying glass and praised the young writer for a "true comic spirit."[6] It took him several years to repay the compliment in his contribution to a special issue of *Envoy* devoted to James Joyce. Significantly, Ó Nualláin emphasised the comic quality of Joyce's *oeuvre*:

[3] For Ó Nualláin's biography, I am relying on what is probably the most authoritative source of information about his life, Anthony Cronin's *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien* (London: Grafton Books, 1989).

[4] See Seamus Deane, *A Short History of Irish Literature* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), p. 195.

[5] See Flann O'Brien, *The Dalkey Archive* (London: Flamingo, 1993), p. 165.

[6] Quoted on the back cover of Flann O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Penguin, 2001).

> The number of people invited to contribute to this issue has necessarily been limited. Yet it is curious that none makes mention of Joyce's superber quality: his capacity for humour. Humour, the handmaid for sorrow and fear, creeps out endlessly in all Joyce's works. He uses the thing, in the same way as Shakespeare does but less formally, to attenuate the fear of those who have belief and who genuinely think that they will be in hell or in heaven shortly, and possibly very shortly. With laughs he palliates the sense of doom that is the heritage of the Irish Catholic.[7]

What strikes Ó Nualláin's readers in this description is that it fits *his own* works in a remarkably adequate manner. It is specifically Ó Nualláin's fiction which brims over with informal humour. Here is how in 1939 he advertised his first book in a letter to Ethel Mannin: "It is supposed to be a lot of belching, thumb-nosing and belly-laughing and I honestly believe that it is funny in parts. It is also by way of being a sneer at all the slush which has been unloaded from this country on the credulous English although they, it is true, manufacture enough of their own odious slush to make the import unnecessary."[8] "Laughs in the face of doom" is then a particularly appropriate formula for both Joyce's and Ó Nualláin's works, and, although Ó Nualláin was wary of acknowledging their affinities, in terms of their comic genius they were certainly on a par.

The humour of Ó Nualláin's fiction, the fiction which he invariably signed Flann O'Brien, rests on the masterful use of the grotesque. Also, it involves a truly carnivalesque disregard for the ontological integrity of characters and settings. In *At Swim-Two-Birds*, which might be read as a metafictional commentary on his subsequent novels, Ó Nualláin has his narrator expound on the status of the literary character, his views on the issue being an anticipation of postmodernist theories:

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[7] Brian O'Nolan, "A Bash in the Tunnel" (1951), in *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century*, ed. David Pierce (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), p. 612.

[8] Quoted in Anthony Cronin, *No Laughing Matter: The Life and Times of Flann O'Brien*..., p. 104.

> It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should be allowed a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living. This would make for self-respect, contentment and better service. It would be incorrect to say that it would lead to chaos. Characters should be interchangeable as between one book and another. The entire corpus of literature should be regarded as a limbo from which the discerning authors could draw their characters as required, creating only when they failed to find a suitable existing puppet. The modern novel should be largely a work of reference. Most authors spend their time saying what has been said before – usually said much better. A wealth of references to existing works would acquaint the reader instantaneously with the nature of each character, would obviate tiresome explanations and would effectively preclude mountebanks, upstarts, thimbleriggers and persons of inferior education from an understanding of contemporary literature.[9]

Accordingly, the narrator proposes that characters should be produced in the process of "aestho-autogamy," which will allow writers to incorporate them into their works as fully developed and mature persons. By way of an experiment he introduces one John Furriskey, who is born at the age of twenty-five, "with a memory but without a personal experience to account for it."[10]

While Ó Nualláin's first novel, with its mixture of characters and incidents borrowed from Irish mythology, Middle Irish romance, cowboy stories and folklore, is a perfect illustration of Julia Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, *The Third Policeman* aspires to a different status, namely that of a "source text." Its intertextuality is thickly veiled, and its author sincerely believed that he had hit on an idea hitherto unexplored in fiction.[11] In 1940 Ó Nualláin ap-

[9] O'Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*..., p. 25.

[10] Ibidem, p. 9.

[11] See Ó Nualláin's letter to William Saroyan, appended to the Flamingo edition of the novel, in which the author asserts the following: "I think that the idea of a man being dead all the time is pretty new." O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*..., p. 228.

proached dozens of publishers, and they all rejected the book, which was not published until after his death, in 1967. It seems rather ironic that after the failure of his first novel, which did not sell more than 244 copies, Ó Nualláin should have had so many problems with the publication of a completely different work, with a much more consistent plot, a neat structure and a perfectly acceptable ethical framework. And yet at the beginning of WWII the book's theme of death and police control, as well as its detachment from actuality, proved to be an insurmountable obstacle to its commercial success. Ó Nualláin's subtle satire on the Ireland ruled by Eamon de Valera and his Fianna Fáil went largely unappreciated, although as a civil servant (Private Secretary to successive Ministers for Local Government) he must have drawn on his own experience while parodying the officialese spoken by self-important members of the Irish political elite.

Maybe what discouraged some publishers was the inconclusive ending of the novel. And yet, as I shall argue further on, the design of the work is consciously and consistently cyclistic, or, to be more specific – bicyclistic. *The Third Policeman* is set in an unspecified village, at an unspecified point in time, and the story is revealed to the reader by an anonymous narrator. The plot revolves round his adventures, first in the village, where he murders a rich neighbour, and then in a mysterious place under the jurisdiction of three weird policemen. The story falls neatly into two major sections. The first is concerned with the hero's childhood, the death of his parents, his fascination with the insane de Selby's philosophy, and his friendship with one John Divney, a truly devious guy, who instigates the narrator to commit murder and robbery. The second section begins with the narrator's visit to his victim's house to retrieve the hidden loot. It turns out that the box, which Divney was supposed to have put under a loose board in the floor, is gone. The moment the narrator starts groping for it, he experiences an extraordinary sensation. It is not until the very end of the novel that the reader discovers what produced this sensation: Divney planted a bomb in the place of the box, and the sensation is that of making a transition to the after-life. However, the narrator's description of the transition makes it prac-

tically impossible to detect any transcendental dimension to it: "It was some change which came upon me or upon the room, indescribably subtle, yet momentous, ineffable. It was as if daylight had changed with unnatural suddenness, as if the temperature of the evening had altered greatly in an instant or as if the air had become twice as rare or twice as it had been in the winking of an eye; perhaps all of these and other things happened together for all my senses were bewildered all at once and could give me no explanation."[12] Clearly, little does he realise that he is already in hell. And the infernal quality of his continued existence will consist, among other things, in the hero's ignorance of his actual bodily, mental and spiritual condition.

All those who expect a Dantean description to follow will be gravely disappointed. Ó Nualláin's inferno seems so incredibly *terrestial* that the narrator will take quite a while to discover the reason for all the supernatural incidents which befall him henceforth. First he has an odd conversation with the man whom he recently murdered in cold blood. Unabashed, he tries to obtain a clue as to the whereabouts of the precious box. The old man finally obliges and suggests that the narrator go to the police station where lost property may be stored. Thereby the hero leaves the familiar surroundings and enters a different land whose centre of gravity is the police barracks. The realisation that the otherworld is governed by surreal (or perhaps subreal) principles insinuates itself into the narrator's consciousness in a painstakingly gradual way. One by one, he is exposed to alternative laws of optics, physics and mechanics. However, one of the most devilish illusions that the narrator falls prey to consists in the external similarity of his inferno to the good old world he used to inhabit. But it is not until he is taken for a ride (in a lift) that he discovers how close to eternity he has found himself.

In what follows I would like to explore the deviations from the realistic and the rational which abound in the land of mad policemen. Furthermore, I intend to pay particular attention to how the narrator of Ó Nualláin's novel accomodates himself to the new

[12] Ibidem, pp. 20–21.

circumstances, which necessitate his redefinition of the natural and the logical. Moreover, the "hellish" perspective that he gradually acquires will also involve his redefinition of the human and the mechanical. Shortly, we shall understand the underlying principles of the realm in which people become bicycles and eternity is literally close at hand.

On the surface, the setting of the second part of the novel seems incredibly realistic. When the narrator sets out on a bicycle search with Sergeant Pluck, they can see blue mountains on the horizon but altogether the landscape is pretty ordinary and markedly pastoral for its infernal provenance: "Half-way to these mountains the view got clearer and was full of humps and hollows and long parks of fine bogland with civil people here and there in the middle of it working with long instruments, you could hear their voices calling across the wind and the crack of the dull carts on the roadways. White buildings could be seen in several places and cows shambling lazily from here to there in search of pasture."[13] Unmistakably, this is the rural Ireland of Seamus Heaney's early poems, where his ancestors disturbed the bogland going for the turf. Yet Brian Ó Nualláin makes this archetypal Celtic scenery witness most startling physical aberrations: when they return from the excursion, the constable enlightens the narrator as to the particulars of the Atomic Theory, which was, among other things, responsible for turning his great-grandfather into a horse.

Perhaps it will be best to leave the explaining to Sergeant Pluck himself. Therefore I shall confine myself to providing the context in which his elucidation is offered. Namely, on their way back to the police barracks, the narrator is puzzled to learn that every Monday, come rain or come shine, the policeman takes pains to rob one Michael Gilhaney of his bicycle. The theft is duly reported to the police by the owner of the velocipede, and, naturally enough, Sergeant Pluck undertakes to retrieve and restore the bicycle to Gilhaney. For obvious reasons, the search proves to be mere child's play because the policeman knows in advance where the parts of the

[13] Ibidem, p. 84.

stolen bike are hidden. But it is not until they actually restore the vehicle to its owner that Sergeant Pluck informs the narrator of the necessity of applying the above mentioned measures. It turns out that Pluck does that for Gilhaney's own good: otherwise the man is likely to become a bicycle due to the mobility of atoms that humans and inanimate objects alike are made up of. Those atoms, being extremely restless and nomadic fellows, may be exchanged between two bodies which are being struck against each other. The constable concludes as follows:

> The gross and net result of it is that people who spend most of their natural lives riding iron bicycles over the rocky roadsteads of this parish get their personalities mixed up with the personalities of their bicycle as a result of the interchanging of the atoms of each of them and you would be surprised at the number of people in these parts who nearly are half people and half bicycles.[14]

This carefully worked-out theory has been born out in practice. Sergeant Pluck points out that the behaviour of people who are nearly fifty per cent bicycles differs considerably from that of ordinary, entirely human parishioners. Those bicycle-people will usually lean with one elbow on walls or stand propped by one foot at kerbstones. Otherwise they must be in constant motion because should they, unsupported, come to a standstill, they are bound to collapse ungracefully. Pluck also mentions the complications which arise from borrowing someone else's bicycle and demonstrates how easily that can lead to gross improprieties: he tells of a sad episode involving a lady teacher's bicycle which Gilhaney abducted and disappeared with. When the young teacher rushed out of the school she found only the man's bicycle and, having no option but to mount it, she became a party to Gilhaney's immorality.

What sounds like a typical cock-and-bull story (or an Irish fact[15], if you like) gradually starts undermining the narrator's common-

[14] Ibidem, p. 93.

[15] On the epistemological status of Irish facts, see Hugh Kenner, *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), pp. 3–10.

sensical approach to reality. In a place where *sensus communis* – in the original sense of the notion which referred to opinion held by the community as a whole – clearly allows for the hybridisation of the organic and the mechanical, he has to take Sergeant Pluck's word for the truth of his account. At first, however, he is quite incredulous, which he does not hesitate to confess to the policeman: "I find it is a great strain for me to believe what I see, and I am becoming afraid occasionally to look at some things in case they would have to be believed."[16] And, indeed, precautions must be taken because bicycles are capable of much more than they seem to. No one has seen them moving by themselves but they do happen to change their location overnight; no one has caught them eating but food does disappear when it is left unattended. That something highly irregular is going on in the parish becomes self-evident for the narrator once he is shown an extremely sophisticated device called eternity. A secret passage leads to a place which consists of an underground lift and a complex of chambers where mysterious apparatuses sustain and monitor eternity itself. The chambers are all alike and seem to be infinite in number due to an optical illusion. In eternity time is suspended and neither change nor progress are possible, therefore the policemen spend their nights there to avoid growing older while asleep. Like a torrential wave, "facts" about the unearthly parish and its workings overwhelm the narrator and burrow their way through the corridors of his sense of reality.

In the end, they affect his perception of the immediate surroundings to such an extent that he is fully reconciled to the notion of humanised bicycles and alternative physics. His adaptability to the infernal principles is reflected in his modified view of human-bicycle relationships. When he is about to escape from the police barracks, having been accused of a crime that he did not commit, the narrator makes up his mind to steal Sergeant Pluck's bicycle and use it as a means of transport. On approaching the velocipede, he discovers its larger-than-merely-mechanical appeal; indeed, the bicycle seems to be possessed of some feminine qualities:

[16] O'Brien, *The Third Policeman*..., p. 89.

> I knew that I liked this bicycle more than I had ever liked any other bicycle, better even than I had liked some people with two legs. I liked her unassuming competence, her docility, the simple dignity of her quiet way. She now seemed to rest beneath my friendly eyes like a tame fowl which will crouch submissively, awaiting with outhunched wings the caressing hand. [...] How desireable her seat was, how charming the invitation of her slim encircling handle-arms, how unaccountably competent and reassuring her pump resting warmly against her rear thigh![17]

In an instant, he is transported with delight. The bicycle's faultlessly seductive rotundities prove irresistible. What he used to see as a mere object acquires the status of a partner and accomplice. Laden with subtle erotic overtones, his description of the smooth and straight road to their fulfilment is a truly unique and unprecedented piece of amorous discourse involving man and vehicle:

> How can I convey the perfection of my comfort on the bicycle, the completeness of my union with her, the sweet responses she gave me at every particle of her frame? I felt that I had known her for many years and that she had known me and that we understood each other utterly. She moved beneath me with agile sympathy in a swift, airy stride, finding smooth ways among the stony cracks, swaying and bending skilfully to match my changing attitudes, even accomodating her left pedal patiently to the awkward working of my wooden leg.[18]

Their union climaxes in a momentary return to the narrator's old village where he appears as a ghost and scares to death his old friend, who betrayed and murdered him twenty years back. At the peak of his excitement, the narrator is again brought over the borderline between death and life, as if the moment of bliss allowed him a glimpse of another reality. Soon, however, he has to undertake the same journey to hell and go through the same motions and routines that brought him to the police barracks. The only difference is that

[17] Ibidem, p. 194.
[18] Ibidem, p. 196.

now he is accompanied by Divney. Having had all the memories erased from his mind, he recuperates his capacity for wonder and is poised to enter another *vicious cycle* of infernal initiation. Now it becomes clear that his personal inferno will consist in the endless cyclicity of irrational encounters with weird policemen and their incredible velocipedes.